
Sidney F. Huttner

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SHARPists not aware of paper conservator and historian Cathleen A. Baker’s Legacy Press may want to take this opportunity to familiarize themselves with its publications to date, all of them related to technologies of the book (see [http://www.legacypress.com/about-contact.html](http://www.legacypress.com/about-contact.html)). *Suave Mechanicals Volume 1* is the first of a proposed series of volumes, each containing some number of essays on the history of bookbinding. It consists of nine essays by authors unlikely to be known widely among SHARPists but respected in their principal fields as bookbinders, conservators, curators, or librarians.

The nine essays might have been grouped in a number of somewhat arbitrary ways, but the editor has chosen to order them merely by author’s surname. Reorganizing them with an eye more closely to geography and epoch, there are three on early cultures: Evyn Kropf on historic repairs to Islamic bindings, Martha Romero on 16th Century Mexican bindings created under the influence of European styles and techniques, and Sylvie Merian on the significance of cover embellishments for Armenian manuscripts. Three focus on early U.S. binding: Consuela Metzger on colonial blankbooks and Julia Miller and John Townsend on mainly 18th century scaleboard (thin wooden) bindings. Jennifer Rosner writes on a short-lived U.S. enthusiasm of the 1850s, elaborately decorated papier-mâché bindings (and other objects) richly encrusted with mother-of-pearl scraps and other materials.

Robert Milevski describes the varied methods (e.g., stamps, tickets) by which European, British, and American binders signed books they bound; he includes a few pages on 15th to 17th century books but focuses the bulk of his 86-page essay on 18th and 19th century titles. The final paper, by Jeffrey Peachey, is simultaneously the most general and the most specialized: his 65-page essay exhaustively (but refreshingly) describes and illustrates “The Compression of Signatures in Bookbinding Prior to Sewing” by beating, rolling, and pressing the folded sheets, with an intimate focus on the tools and machines used between the 15th and late 19th centuries. If you’ve ever wondered how the shape of a hammer face affected its use, wonder no longer!

The writing is, by and large, non-technical, and all of the articles are likely to be accessible to general readers. SHARPists will find a considerable number of fresh perspectives on books as objects.

Baker has her books printed and bound in Ann Arbor, which must permit more far opportunities to actually collaborate with printers than the usual procedure of sending disks to the Orient, and she specifies a calendared paper stock that reproduces color images beautifully (and produces a book weighing well over three pounds). She allows authors the numerous illustrations the subject requires: her generosity in this regard is extreme. With almost as many illustrations as pages, the images occupy nearly as much space as text, and the Kropf, Merian, Metzger, Miller, and Rosner essays are further supplemented with PDFs totaling 130MB on a laid-in DVD.
The volume concludes with brief author biographies and a carefully compiled name and subject index that usefully spans the collection of essays. The DVD has a searchable file that gathers the text of all the captions in the other PDFs.

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